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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined how teenagers react to and interpret certain popular media messages. In addition it explored the relationship between content containing various sexual messages and teenagers' responses to those messages, with particular attention to the critical abilities this audience exhibits. Fifty male and female teenagers aged 11-15 were recruited from public and private schools and were individually interviewed during the summer of 1989. Each had been given a videotape to view containing clips from two popular teen-oriented PG-13 movies ("Top Gun" and "For Keeps") and two then-popular music videos (Madonna's "Express Yourself" and Ton Loc's "Funky Cool Medina"). Respondents also completed a questionnaire surveying the range and quantity of movie or videotape viewing and assessing social and demographic characteristics. Results indicated that material that was well liked was processed with more detail: teenagers were more articulate about and remembered more about content they preferred. For the most part, these movies stimulated affirmation of the teenagers' existing ideas about appropriate sexual behavior. In that sense, the embedded sexual messages did not provoke self questioning as much as they provoked self affirmation. Teenagers' interaction with music videos seemed to operate quite differently. These teens interpreted music videos in terms of the artist performing them, his or her other work, the musical genre, and the sorts of people who like that genre. The sexual messages in the chosen videos were sometimes misunderstood or ignored, sometimes the object of derision or embarrassment. They were apparently not as capable of stimulating self awareness as the movies. (Twenty-seven references are attached.) (PRA)

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Popular Media and the Teenage Sexual Agenda

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Abstract: **Popular Media and the Teenage Sexual Agenda**

This qualitative study examines how teenagers react to and interpret certain popular media messages. The research goal was to explore the relationship between content containing various sexual messages and teenagers' responses to those messages, with particular attention to the critical abilities this audience exhibits. Fifty male and female teenagers aged 11 to 15 were individually interviewed during the summer of 1989. Each had been given a videotape to view containing clips from two popular teen-oriented PG-13 movies (Top Gun and For Keeps) and two then-popular music videos (Madonna's Express Yourself and Ton Loc's Funky Cool Medina). Respondents also completed a questionnaire surveying the range and quantity of movie or videotape viewing and assessing social and demographic characteristics. A one to two hour interview sought to locate how individuals think about certain sexual problems or situations and how they negotiate the sexual content in the specific video materials we gave them. Only a portion of the results are addressed in this paper.

There are considerable differences in how teens react to and decode music videos compared to movies. It should be noted that in this sample, video media of all sorts were omnipresent. The amount of movie-going, tape viewing and Nintendo-playing is extremely high, and it is clear that the types of movies one watches or music one likes are cultural (and gender) markers. Popular media constitute an important social environment for teenagers, and members of this sample regularly view and talk about movies or television fare with their friends and family. Our interviews underscore the role of music videos as incidental and transitory in these teens' popular media world; they are viewed with a great deal of detachment and judgement. However, teenagers' responses to movies suggest that form's experiential power draws viewers into a stronger dialogue and richer interpretive process.

The "movie diet" of this group was fuelled largely by videotapes which were often viewed repeatedly. Affirming some other research on children and media, we found that material that was well liked was processed with more detail: teenagers were more articulate about and remembered more about content that they preferred. For the most part this group exhibited strong opinions about the movies' content; these movies stimulated affirmation of the teenagers' existing ideas about appropriate sexual behavior. In that sense the embedded sexual messages did not provoke self questioning as much as they provoked self affirmation. Thus, a movie portrayal in which abortion is rejected does not necessarily translate into a viewer's rejection of abortion as an alternative to an unwanted pregnancy. Rather, it acts as a springboard for articulating one's own feelings.

Teenagers' interaction with music videos seemed to operate quite differently. These teens interpreted music videos in terms of the artist performing them, his or her other work, the musical genre, and the sorts of people who like that genre. In other words, this popular cultural form is embedded in a set of larger cultural experiences with varied significance. The sexual messages in the videos chosen for discussion were sometimes misunderstood or ignored, sometimes the object of derision or embarrassment. They were apparently not as capable of stimulating self awareness as were movies.

Popular Media and the Teenage Sexual Agenda

Introduction

Waves of concern periodically rock the country when sexual media content offends some people. An "us versus them" explosion has occasionally occurred, with controversial media messages at the center of censorship, morality, propriety, and First Amendment rights concerns. Women Against Pornography, the National Coalition on Television Violence, the Moral Majority, the ACLU, and the movie, television and music industries have all squared off with each other on several occasions when media products, especially those directed at children are under fire. Critics, particularly those with no social science data to ground their claims, are fond of laying the drop in literacy rates, the rise of gangs and violence, and escalating teenage pregnancy statistics at the feet of popular media. A recent Newsweek article illustrates a typical stance when it quotes from media critic Marc Crispin Miller: "It's just not the case that teenagers are growing up more visually sophisticated by virtue of being immersed in video images" (Schwartz, 1990, p. 36)

This study explores the relationship between exposure to media messages with sexual content and their interpretation by adolescents. Our point of departure is that young adolescents are active viewers of television, and that active viewership involves judging and interpreting content. In contrast to a great deal of research in the 1960s and 1970s, this study is not predicated on an assumption that television and other video media are uniform in their effect on viewers, nor that they are homogeneous in their message. Its approach integrates the functional assumptions of uses and gratifications research--that people choose their media and the content within a specific medium in order to achieve certain gratifications--with some of the concerns for contextuality and "meaning systems" common to interpretive research (Lindlof, 1987).

Viewers' interpretive ability is important insofar as it suggests how television can influence individual agendas for making personal choices with regard to contraception and sexual situations. The prevailing popular wisdom when it comes to mass media and teenagers is that adolescents are directly and negatively influenced by messages that convey sexual permissiveness, that are inattentive to the outcomes of sexual activity, and that ignore contraception. These concerns are part of the larger tradition of media criticism that assumes commercial media (whether it was movies in the 1930s, comic books in the 1950s or commercial television in the 1970s) have direct impact on viewers' knowledge, attitude and behavior regarding various subjects.

The opportunities and abilities to learn the "right" messages from media and to identify and query the "wrong" ones are at the heart of the issue of teenagers and popular media. Current social problems related to teenage pregnancy have catalyzed discussion.[1]

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[1] An extended review of the status of teenage pregnancy will not be offered here. Suffice it to say that teenagers are among those least prepared to deal with unintended pregnancy and its consequences. Over the past twenty years, there has been an increase in the rate of nonmarital intercourse among teenagers, and in the rate of teenagers who choose to raise their babies rather than offering them for adoption. According to one study (Maciak, 1987) between 1974 and 1980 the pregnancy rate among all teens increased by 8.2% while the birth rate declined by 9.2%, indicating that there was an increase in the rate of pregnancy terminations. Approximately 8% of all teens, and 18% of all sexually experienced 15 to 19 year-old girls become pregnant each year, and the rate changes with race, socioeconomic status, metropolitan residence, education level and family structure. Maciak concluded that "continued efforts aimed both at delaying early sexual experience among teens and encouraging the use of contraception among sexually active teens are necessary to further reduce teenage pregnancy and birth rates in this country." In the current era of restrictive laws mandating parental involvement in teenagers' birth control or abortion decisions, the

Exploring whether certain media have sensitizing or influencing roles, how their content interacts with preexisting sets of information and dispositions, and what meaning systems operate in teenagers' exposed to such content is the focus here. This effort is distinctive in that it seeks to construct the broader "meaning systems" teenagers use to interpret sexual material.

Literature Review

The sexual content of popular media

It is by now a truism that popular media contain a great deal of sexual content. Content analyses repeatedly demonstrate its frequency: prime time television and soap operas often refer to prostitution, rape, sexual intercourse, and other sexual intimacies (Greenberg et al., 1980; Abramson and Mechanic, 1983; Harris, 1988); music videos are dominated by themes of courtship or dating, with love a familiar subtext in all sorts of their portrayals (Brown and Campbell, 1986). It should be noted that most content analyses examining sexually-related content deal with just one particular medium or message type--television or music videos or best selling books, for example.

Intensified competition among different forms of popular media--movies, commercial television and cable--have brought the portrayal of sexuality to new levels during the past decade. Whether it is song lyrics by 2 Live Crew or bondage in MTV videos, references to sexual activity, relationships or gender stereotypes are omnipresent and increasingly graphic. Some attribute network television's greater attention to sex in the 1980s (images of couples in bed together, partial nudity, etc.) as a response to cable television's ability to air R-rated movies on services such as HBO or Cinemax. (The networks' hold on audiences suffered greatly as new media, including cable, VCRs, and independent television stations proliferated during the 1980s.)

A great deal of media material attended to by teenagers and preteens contains sexual information, whether it is direct information, implicit values or explicit behavioral models. Some people are concerned that such material over-emphasizes physical sexual activity at the expense of other topics such as contraception. A recent Lou Harris report seems to confirm this. It found that during the 1987-88 television season there were over 27 occurrences each hour of sexual behavior while there were few references to contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and abortion (Harris, 1988). Content analyses of song lyrics directed at the teen market also document their concentrated attention to love and sexual relationships (Brown and Campbell, 1986; see Carey, 1969 and Harmon, 1972 for some alternative speculations concerning the meaning of popular songs).

However, content analyses affirming the existence of researcher-defined messages categories, while a first step in enabling one to state that there is a patterned representation, cannot really ascertain the effects of that content on audiences.

Teenagers and video media

U.S. teenagers are surrounded by various mass media and communication technologies. Nearly sixty percent of all homes now have cable tv, purveyor of MTV, VH-I, Nickelodeon and Disney, along with other programming popular among teenagers. The

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potential role of other realms such as schools and mass media in affecting teenagers' ideas and knowledge about sexuality and sexual behavior is heightened.

penetration of VCRs is even higher--roughly 68%, meaning families have easy access to rented movies or material taped off the air or cable. That about half of the teens in a national survey had their own television sets suggests that teenagers have easy access to opportunities to select their own video media (Miller, 1990).

Common statistics report that teenagers between 12 and 17 watch 22 hours of television per week or roughly three hours a day.[2] While we found no current data examining teenagers' use of taped rental movies, we suspect that teenagers make extensive use of this material. Some researchers have documented that the sort of programming teens prefer does change with age, and certainly the role of other media such as music, video games or comics in defining a group subculture rises in adolescent years. Murdock and McCron (1973) and Roe (1985), for example, found that children chose music that expressed their social values and reflected their social groups. It has also been documented that teenagers with less satisfying peer relationships watch more television (e.g., Chaffee and Tims, 1976; Schramm, Lyle and Parker, 1961; Johnstone, 1974).

How media are used by children and how media content can influence attitudes or behavior has been the topic of different schools of investigation. In the long debate regarding media effects, young people are a special case in that they are assumed to be tabula rasa and particularly influenceable. Bandura's social learning theory provided a scientifically grounded explanation for the process by which media effects might occur. Researchers such as Gerbner (who with his colleagues explores cultivation analysis) provided some data suggesting that simple long term and cumulative exposure to media content engendered stereotypical and biased images of certain aspects of society. Additionally, uses and gratifications proponents (Greenberg and Heeter, 1983; Greenberg and Dominick, 1979; Roe, 1985; Gantz, 1978;) provide evidence that certain adolescent subgroups use media for certain reasons--passing time, companionship, learning about majority culture, habit and so forth.[3]

The process by which a media message conveys sexual information (using "information" in its broadest sense) is not well understood. Most studies linking certain sorts of outcomes with exposure to a media message fail to acknowledge the variability in messages across types of programing. Too often a gross measure of "television exposure" is used as if all television content were the same. Moreover, viewers' specific contexts and interpretive frames are conventionally absent. For example, daytime serials may contain more sexual content in the context of on-going relationships than may a prime time drama; that contextual feature can influence the interpretations one applies to the content, even though both program types broadly present sexual content.

Hawkins and Pingree (1982) point out that "researchers who use more specific viewing measures, such as television-use diaries, will have more meaningful results. Exposure measures need to be capable of specifying at least this level of detail, and it is quite likely that better understanding of viewing situations (attention, selectivity, and so on) will lead to better understanding of whether and how television content influences social reality" (p. 245). Pingree and Hawkins also urge that researchers begin to query how individuals construct social realities from the messages to which they are exposed, and that the sorts of thought processes and real world experiences necessary for video media to make an impact on one's social reality be assessed. In the same vein, Dorr (1981) urges that "people's

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[2] We did not have current data on average time is spent in front of a VCR. Heeter at al. reported 1.3 days per week VCR use for children and 0.5 hours VCR use for adults in their 1988 research.

[3] This report will not detail the various theoretical and methodological criticisms directed at cultivation theory or uses and gratifications research.

involvement with television characters, particularly those in continuing series, needs to be explored further so that we might understand how and when it occurs and what contribution it makes to effects of exposure" (p. 345).

Recent work by Lull (1985), Wolf (1987), and Cantor (1987) and Lindlof (1987) illustrate that alternative methodologies subsumed under the phrase "qualitative research" are particularly adept at providing fuller explanations of some of these phenomena. While those methods are not without fault, they can "provide understandings about the social world unavailable to those who apply [hypothesis testing] methods of study" (Cantor, 1987, p. 254). In fact, there is a long tradition of qualitative research on media and youth. Wolf's (1987) work is an excellent illustration of the way in which interviews with and observations of children in a day care/summer camp can contextualize how children talk about television and how they understand television narrative. Her research documents how children "work at making sense of television" (Wartella, 1987, p. 115). The value of this type of research is its ability to analyze and integrate phenomena not amenable to conventional survey self-report measures. Extended observations, probing questions with opportunities to follow up and clarify, self-revealing commentary from subjects, all provide rich data to the qualitative researcher.

Qualitative research can be useful in elucidating the meanings children assign to sexual content in media messages and shed some light on how they arrive at their particular meaning systems. In summary, while quantitative research has done a solid job of documenting exposure to media (especially television), gratifications sought and obtained from that exposure, and the nature of the general content (again, especially television and music videos) teenagers use, the linking mechanism by which the content is transformed into some meaningful cognition or affect is missing. It is that link the present research addresses.

The interpretive skills applied to media messages therefore can indicate something about the impact of sexual content. Adolescent and preadolescent viewers are in the process of developing their interpretive skills even as they are developing a repertoire of choices with regard to their own sexual values and behaviors. The ability to make responsible choices during a lifetime is greatly influenced by values and evaluative skills developed during childhood and adolescence. During ages 11 to 15 particularly, children are negotiating their need for family ties with their need for independence (Chilman, 1983). The interpretations teenagers make of certain media content, and the interpretive process in which they engage may shed some light on the role of video media in affirming selected values and perceptions.

Research questions

The interpretive process is a general phrase referring to various cognitions, affective states, empathic abilities, and personal interests. This paper develops only a few of its elements.[4] The choice of what to focus on is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but the aspects developed below provide a useful starting point.

The specific areas this study was designed to probe concern:

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[4] The complete report of this research (forthcoming) will provide a more comprehensive examination of other aspects of the interpretive process, and will combine that data with some quantitative analyses of our sample.

(1) the arena of meanings teenagers use to make sense of sexual content in media. What sorts of connections with other real life or mediated events make sense for teenagers exposed to sexual content?

(2) the social environment in which the teenager experiences sexual content in media. How do families and friends explain or influence how a teenager selects and interprets certain messages?

(3) the role of narrative or content elements in eliciting various responses in teenage viewers. What sorts of narrative elements make sense to teenagers? What sexual meanings are apparent to them in the content, and what sexual meanings do they bring with them to the material?

(4) the impact of alternative message vehicles. How can we compare the impact of forms such as music videos to forms such as movies or television?

Research Design

Sample

We recruited 50 males and females between the ages of 11 and 15 years from local public and private schools as well as local organizations. Parental consent for their participation in this study was obtained ahead of time, with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality for the participants.

Participating teenagers were given videotape cassettes of material we assembled from two popular PG-13 movies (Top Gun and For Keeps), and two music videos (Express Yourself by Madonna and Funky Cool Medina by Ton Loc). The material was somewhat familiar to most teens who regularly watch cable television; it contained some images and themes related to sexual behavior and other portrayals unrelated to that topic.[5] Additionally, the participants were given a questionnaire to complete which assessed demographic information and also certain television, VCR and movie viewing habits.

The content in the movies was straightforward narrative, devoid of flashbacks or any unusual production conventions. In one the content focused on the decision-making of a high school age couple faced with an unexpected pregnancy; in the other a man and a woman develop a relationship against the background of a high powered flight school environment. The music videos differ in terms of narrative complexity. The Ton Loc video is closely based on song lyrics while Madonna's video has richly textured images derivative of the old movie Metropolis. Its images do not have a close patterning to the song.

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[5] Briefly, For Keeps concerns a high school couple, Stan and Darcy. Darcy becomes pregnant and decides to keep her baby. The movie shows some of their difficulties but ends with the two of them resolved to stay together and go to college. Top Gun is a military male competition-achievement movie with a love interest. Madonna's video contained several scenes of the star scantily clothed, and in one scene she is naked, chained to a bed. As some of the quotes suggest, many of the video's images are erotic. The Ton Loc video tells the story of a magic potion that forces the drinker to fall in love with his or her companion. The potion backfires on the main character (Ton Loc). Its images include a transvestite, more scantily clad women, and a bejeweled and in furs Ton Loc.

Procedure

The teenagers were given a certain period of time to view the tape's content, generally about one week. Participants were then interviewed, usually in their homes or in another familiar place (e.g., a summer program or camp). The specific goals of the interview were identified as pertaining to attitudes toward television and viewing patterns. During a segment of the interview, the tape was replayed without sound, and the participant was asked to relay what was on the screen.[6] We used this technique to elicit the individual's interpretations of the content in a relaxed, conversational way. Our intent was to get a sense of how the teenager constructed "the story" in the absence of audio cues. This construction would move easily from personal observations and presentation of self, to story, and back to generalizing about the meaning of the story, and so forth.

The interview questions focused on obtaining information regarding how they view television, whether commercial, cable or VCR fare, and how they interpret it. Specific questions framed around the taped material included:

(1) the nature of the viewing setting(s) they chose for the tape
(2) memory of the material they viewed
(3) what in the tape they liked and disliked, and why
(4) the key message of selected sexually-oriented passages
(5) how they felt about that message: to what extent it represented a new idea or thought, or something they'd thought about or already discussed, etc.

The interview technique and questions were pretested before use in the field. The data from these interviews were analyzed in terms of the critical skills children exhibit in their discussion.

Analysis

All interviews were taped; transcription was undertaken over a period of several months following the interviews.[7] All the interviews were read once, and coding and concept schemes were devised based on the themes apparent in the first reading. Multiple readings of the transcriptions followed the development of these schemes and explanatory concepts were tested and refined. All interviews were indexed for the presence or absence of certain concepts or themes.

In order to explicate "arenas of meaning" we examined the range of references teenagers made to explain both what they saw in the movie and video content given them and how they felt about it; their reactions to or perceptions of sexual material were a special focus.

Specific references to aspects of the social environment (school, parents, peers, relatives, boy- and girlfriends) were noted throughout, and our coding focused on how the social environment influenced both exposure and interpretation.

With respect to narrative content, we fully expected teenagers of this age category to be able to grasp more complex emotions--such as frustration, confusion, embarrassment, guilt--presented in video material; we also expected most of them to empathize with some characters if they understood the character or the context. (See Dorr (1981) for an

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[6] This follows Wolf's (1987) and Applebee's (1978) notions of putting children in an "expressing mode."
[7] It would have been more desirable to have the tapes transcribed as the interviews were completed so that we could have altered the interviews as we saw themes emerging.

elaboration of emotions and empathy in childrens' response to television.) References to how the story or movie or video is put together, however, reflect a more sophisticated awareness of video media as product. Similarly, the ability to explicate a character's feelings and intentions and to analyze them suggests an appreciation of narrative devices and the ability to distance oneself from the mediated experience. Evidence of these abilities in the interviews was scrutinized and coded. Finally, the interpretive processes applied to music videos and to movies were compared so that we could assess any distinction between how teens approach the content in videos as opposed to that in movies.

Results

The results are organized according to the major research questions presented above, but the third and fourth are combined because the narrative elements or response to the narrative elements largely explain the difference in how teenagers react to music videos compared to movies. First the sources of meaning are addressed; next, the role of the social environment in the interpretive process is examined; third, teenagers' interpretations of narrative elements is explored, with attention to the differences in how they interpret videos and movies.

Sources of meanings

Members of this sample drew on several sources as they negotiated the sexual meanings of the movies and music videos. Three components are addressed here. First, like any adult viewer, these teenagers bring their own selective perceptions with them when they watch television, movies or videos. These preconceptions enabled them to judge media content, particularly superficial content such as appearance, with ease. The second component has to do with media influence on trends or fashion. A third important component is comprised of "intertextual" references among viewers; an event's or character's meaning was linked to or evaluated against a tv ad, a song, an artist's general image or previous performances. These interviews add new resonance to the notion of "cultivation" insofar as they suggest that media images are linked to each other in the conscious interpretive act.

Most members of the sample did not date (only five had boy- or girl-friends, although most went to dances with peers), and consequently their ability to draw on direct personal experience with sexual partners was limited. However, these younger teens already had definite ideas about what is appropriate behavior for both sexes, especially what is appropriate for girls in the realm of appearances. There is a stereotyped idea about what sorts of images convey character, especially with respect to females. This was evident in how individuals evaluated the major subjects in the sample material. For example, when asked to compare the Kelly McGillis character in Top Gun to other women in a bar scene, most teenagers, particularly females, indicated that because the other women were more skimpily dressed, they were there to get picked up.[8] One black 13 year old thought McGillis "would be safer because the other girls have probably had a lot more people with them." Nearly all girls and many of the boys judged Madonna's appearance to be repugnant because it was too suggestive ("gross" was the most common adjective). As elaborated below, this did not mean they did not like Madonna's songs. Likewise, every assessment of Ton Loc's video included reference to some measure of his attractiveness or appearance; women in that video too were physically appraised.

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[8] Boys sometimes referred to appearance, but they also responded with explanations that she was single in the scene, and that McGillis was attractive.

In contrast to the predispositions merely triggered by video material, new ideas about dancing, clothes, and style were directly created by media--especially music videos. This more superficial and direct influence of media seems evident in several ways. For example, girls frequently remarked on the clothes and fashions their favorite stars or musicians wore, and said that they provided models for current fashion. In this they confirm what other researchers have found with respect to television influence on fashion.[9] Boys evidenced less interest in this aspect of media messages, although they generally agreed that movies or television could tell one something about clothes; however, they rarely elaborated or provided examples.

This is congruent with some findings from uses and gratifications research. Roughly half the sample--with no age difference--also commented that one could learn about dating from watching movies, but there was clear recognition that not all the dating messages were acceptable or correct. With respect to dating, one 11-year old boy said movies gave him a sense of "where you can take them" (referring to females). Several of the girls paid attention to how women responded when men were coming on too strong: "Like maybe if a guy was coming on too strong on a date or something then the girl might tell him to back off and I guess girls could learn a lot from that. I really think that they can. Especially if they like the actress and they think that she is great. Then they will think that probably she is doing the right thing, so I guess I should too" (13-year old girl). But a few were a little more skeptical: "Some [movies] are unrealistic [about how to deal with a boyfriend], but some are [realistic], and you might have the same problem as the person on TV and their solution might be the one you are looking for. Or it might not...." According to this group, video images such as those from movies might be useful for learning about "distant realities" related to some sexual behaviors, but they would not necessarily be embraced unconditionally.

Whether conscious of it or not, teenagers recognized interconnections in symbols and images in mass media materials. They made frequent reference to intertextual information and codes as they interpreted media content. By that we mean that messages present in other media are brought into the decoding of messages in the formats under examination, underscoring the creative aspect of interpretation.[10] Interpreting the music video artists particularly invites responses to the larger cultural forum. This may have something to do with the fact that music videos are fractionalized products to begin with: popular music has a life on the radio and on a tape or disk, in addition to being accompanied by images on a video. Nearly all of our respondents responded to these artists' music as separable from their videos. One could like one performance (usually the music) and not the other (e.g., the video). The movie content, too, was referenced in terms of other movies the main actors or actresses had appeared in, and in terms of other tv programs or movies reminiscent of these particular samples.

To illustrate, our respondents alluded to the video artists' "image," inculcated from various songs, videos, even movies in which the musicians had appeared. Madonna, for example, to one young teen, had a definite image: "I don't like her image...her image says to me that if a guy wanted to sleep with her she would....I mean her video I guess you could say

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[9] One 14-year old, in watching the Ton Loc video, provided a complete fashion commentary: "[They're] too skimpy, some of them are too revealing and some are like...I wouldn't wear that. Like what she has got on, I would never wear. I hate them all except the one girl with the blue jean shorts. I mean I would wear that with like a white top...she is disgusting what she is wearing. (pause) That's cute. I don't know--if that was a little longer that turtleneck dress I would buy that" and so forth.

[10] A simple illustration of this occurred when we wanted to know if the teenagers were aware of home pregnancy tests (used in For Keeps) and how they found out about them. Nearly all said they'd seen them advertised on television.

backs me up." In other words, Madonna had an image even before this person saw the Express Yourself video, one born of magazine, movie, television and previous music video experiences. Several teens mentioned tv shows or other movies that reminded them of video (or movie) content. One older girl was even aware of the Metropolis reference in Madonna's video: "It is kinda arty, very show off. All of this neat stuff, we manage to get the Metropolis set in here, we got this really cute guy...." An 11 year old boy likened the message in Ton Loc's video to an anti-drug campaign in the main character's repudiation of the love potion. "So many bad things happen to him...I guess that is why I think that it is like "Don't take drugs!"--bad things happen to you."

Another example is provided by a 13 year old girl. In response to a query concerning what she thought of Madonna's video she remarked: "I think she uses sex as a way to sell her video and stuff like that. Like there's a commercial like the girl on Hunter in it and she says if you don't drink and drive you can take me home any day. And I don't like that. It's like blackmail. If you do drink and drive, you aren't taking me home...I think she uses [men's] bodies to sell video too." (She believed Madonna uses sex too much, even though she liked her music.) Another respondent compared Ton Loc's and Madonna's songs to REM and U2, commenting that "You can really get into them because they have got good beats and you can dance to them and they have easy lyrics, but it is not because she [Madonna] is very deep or anything. It is not because her stuff means anything. Like REM or U2, they may mean a little more. Ton Loc doesn't mean a thing. (laughter)."

The intertextuality is significant because it underscores the notion that media content is perceived in a much larger forum. The supposed message of any one particular exposure--one program, one movie, even one format--is necessarily enmeshed with related content encountered elsewhere. While this is a byproduct of a commercial media system that uses multiple means of promoting its wares, it also means that the impact of a single format or any single message is necessarily not isolatable.

The social environment

The social environment appears to be important in that the viewing settings and media selection conditions influence initial exposure and subsequent (and concurrent) discussion focused on the material. In this sample of teens it was clear that watching movies, whether in theatres or at home on VCRs, and watching tv generally, were social phenomena. Parents and friends were both generally involved in the experience of movies, parents particularly at home and friends in the theatre setting. Nearly all the members of the sample reported that movies, television or music videos were frequent subjects for discussion with friends--much more so than were school work or news stories for example. That discussion generally focused on retelling portions of the story, commenting on actors or actresses, and evaluating what was liked or not liked.

Insofar as watching movies is still a special recreation (excepting a "tv movie"), it constitutes an event.[11] Something about it is special.[12] While it is not an unusual event for these teens, it is one that involves choosing a movie, setting aside time to watch it, and interaction with someone else in purchasing tickets or renting a tape or enjoying the content. Girls in particular experience movies in the safe, suburban mall settings with their

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[11] Even though renting tapes was extremely common, we found that parents made it special by using rented movies as rewards, or making their choice into games.

[12] We make this distinction because movies on "free" TV may not involve the selectivity and planning this audience exhibited for theatre or VCR movie exhibition.

friends. Their baby-sitters or their mothers take them there with their friends. Alternately, girls stay with their friends overnight and parents rent tapes to entertain them.

We were surprised by the high amount of repeat viewing of some movies that members of the sample reported. Some would see certain movies between 10 and 14 times--once or twice in a theatre and thereafter on tape. This repeated viewing generally indicated the movie was well liked; it also could indicate the quantity of social occasions the teen enjoyed in that watching a tape was typical entertainment when friends were around.

Because the parents must actually do the renting or transporting, choosing a movie is done in consultation with them.[13] In almost every case parents objected to their kids seeing R movies; some movies in the latter categories were allowable if they had the rating because of violence, but not sexual content.

Watching movies was a more home-based experience for boys. It was not a focal point of male friendship the way it was for girls. However, again because parents rented the tapes, parental input or screening on what they watched was evident. Older boys of about 15 more often seemed to get to movies in the theatre in the summertime without their parents--perhaps a function of their increasing freedom as they or their friends near driving age.

While about two thirds of the sample reported some rules for watching television, most of those rules were not specific as to content. No specific prohibitions on MTV were apparent. Rules generally had to do with completing homework before watching tv. The most common parental response to the music video format was that they didn't want them on the tv when they (the parents) were at home because they did not like to be around them.

There were gender differences in movie content preference. Although both males and females enjoyed comedy and suspense or horror, boys more often enjoyed science fiction while girls preferred light adventure (e.g., Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Breakfast Club, etc.). Both males and females affirmed that some movies were "boy movies" and others were "girl movies," but their reasons for assigning definitions varied with their age. For example, younger teens identified boy and girl movies as those with strong same-sex main characters; Top Gun, for example, would be a boy movie from the 12 year old's perspective. Older teens (14 and 15), however, defined boy and girl movies as those in which the main character was attractive to the opposite sex. As one 15 year old boy put it, in Top Gun, the boys would watch Kelly McGillis and the girls would watch Tom Cruise.

In spite of the evidence of parental involvement in media selection, however, there was only limited reference to parents' active viewing with their children. (On the few occasions where there were R rated movies involved, parents would watch with their children.) A few clear exceptions to this generalization, however, illustrate some interesting ways parents use popular media with their teenagers. For example, the mother of one of the girls in the study had used the same movie selected for this study (For Keeps) to illustrate certain sexual values. The mother had rented the tape explicitly in order to watch it with her two daughters--even suggesting that her two daughters hold off on viewing it in a theatre until they could get it for their VCR; she used it to talk about sex and birth control choices: "She asked us questions and told us you know that if you ever got in trouble I would not scream and yell at you. I would just try to help you. And so we did a little talking about it." However this level of parental mediation was exceptional.

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[13] This sample had slightly more than the average VCR penetration.

While movies were enjoyed with siblings or same sex friends, music video, in contrast, was enjoyed almost exclusively alone or with siblings. Watching MTV was essentially a much less planned activity than was watching a movie. Teenagers rarely made a point of watching MTV together, although that could happen accidentally. The experience was reported as being unexceptional and similar to watching any other form of television, although many girls reported that they liked to dance with some of the videos when they liked the songs.

Narrative elements

As mentioned earlier, the movies these teenagers watched had a clear, sequential narrative structure; only one of the music videos could be characterized that way although even it had moments of imagination and fantasy. The Madonna video was complex, its meaning open to many possible interpretations. For the most part, responses to the movies will be discussed separately from responses to the videos because the response to the two genres varied dramatically.

First, in terms of accuracy in understanding the narratives, about a third of the teenagers made a lot of small "mistakes." For example, several did not know what the phrase "carnal knowledge" meant in Top Gun. It comes up during a bet that Maverick cannot have "carnal knowledge" of the McGillis character. About half the teens, especially the younger ones, did not quite understand the nature of the bet; they often thought it had to do with getting a date with the female lead. Certain other words in Top Gun confused the viewers, but significantly, viewers were able to guess what was going on because the context provided other clues. For Keeps was not characterized by even that level of ambiguity.

In spite of some of the misunderstandings, there was strong empathy with the main characters in both movies. Females especially related to Darcy, sometimes volunteering comparisons of her to themselves. Said one in describing her, "She would probably be sort of like the group that I am in. There is a group of people that are real real pretty and real popular and, you know, some of them are pretty smart but they are not really worried about their grades...Then the group that I am in is like, I try to go to school to get better grades." Or from another: "She is smart. She can make a lot of herself, a lot better than what she ended up. In her character she ended up ok, but she could have had something better." The narrative of these movies drew in the viewers.

"Mistakes" in the videos were more common, and unlike the case of the movies, teenage viewers were unable to correct their errors--perhaps because the context was too elliptical or because their interest was lower. In the Ton Loc video, some teenagers did not understand the potion Ton Loc sings about. Some believed it was alcohol and some believed it does not work for him. Others did not understand the perspective of some of the images in the video.[14] [The video has the main character, Ton Loc, in different scenes in which another character has imbibed the potion.]

The Madonna video was a mystery to most. Many said they were confused by it, and confessed they stopped trying to figure it out even as they watched it.[15] Younger teens attempted to comprehend it on a literal level, but they were left with a lot of uncertainty.

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[14] Interviewer: What's the problem with it [the potion]? Respondent: Personally, I don't like booze. I think he's pouring it out cause he's not having good luck.

[15] One 13 year old who professed to enjoy Madonna's songs said bluntly "I like her songs...I don't really understand it [the video]. There is too much stuff going on all at once...it's [the song] that's more important...I'm not paying attention to what I see."

Older teens grasped the affect generated by some of the symbols, but they too expressed exasperation at not understanding "the story." One example can illustrate the difference between the younger and older teens. One 12 year old young girl, after watching the video, expressed concern about the cat in the sequence: where does the cat go? is it taking a message to the man Madonna wants to see? why is it there? In other words, the cat is interpreted literally, as a pet and as an object that needs attention. A 15 year old girl, however, acknowledged the cat was a "sexy" addition to the video.

The point of this discussion is to suggest that viewers perceived the videos as flatter, more distant experiences. They failed to get involved in them, and lacked much emotional attachment to them. Lacking opportunities for characterization, videos are unyielding when young viewers do not comprehend them. This apparently forced the viewers to become listeners, ignoring or curtly evaluating the visual content to which they felt no connection. The narratives in videos do not present complex emotions, and hence it may not be too surprising that teenagers do not appear to "experience" empathy or emotional involvement. In contrast viewers <u>were</u> able to understand the essential idea of the movie scenes even if portions confused them; they grasped a lot of nonverbal elements that defined the main characters. They became involved in the movie portrayals, and their involvement set up a dialogue in which their values were compared to those present in the movie.

<u>Resistance.</u> If involvement or attachment exists, do teenagers automatically identify with and accept a character's perspective on sexual situations? Some comments presented above already suggest that is not the case. We found that many teens in the sample evidenced resistance to the thrust of a particular media message; wholehearted endorsements of character's actions were few. While they empathized with different characters, they interpreted some of the sexual content or issues on their own terms. For example, reacting to the presentation of overbearing parents in an early portion of For Keeps, one 11-year old identifies with the two teenagers: "[kids] should make [the decision about a teenage pregnancy] because parents shouldn't control the kids' lives forever.....They have to make their own decisions for themselves," yet later on he rejects the reality of the movie's positive ending. Very few of the participants believed Darcy and Stan followed the right course. A sampling of these teenagers' evaluations conveys the typical responses. In response to a question on whether Stan and Darcy made the right decision a young male participant responded "Well, they look optimistic...but if they are going to school I don't think they should [have a baby]. A 13-year old girl also disagreed with Stan and Darcy's decision:

> "I don't think that that is a very good choice to make because they had their whole future ahead of them and if they want to go through college and have kids afterwards, that is fine. They just have to go through school first. I know that that may seem different in their situation--how they feel about it --but I think that it is only right to do the logical thing. I think that I think that it would be more cruel to the child to go from home to home and to grow up without any real sense of security.

Another 13-year old comments "I mean the thing about getting married and going and live by themselves it was dumb. They were still in high school." A 15-year old boy (already dating) said in response to a query about whether Stan and Darcy made the right decision, "Well, I guess putting it up for adoption, but if they kept it it wouldn't be that right. That young, being a kid and still having a kid. It would not be very good. It cost a lot of money and they would just be out of money." An older 15-year old said "I think that that is unrealistic because most teenage pregnancies that I see end up getting married and being very unhappy or getting rid of the kid and I think that is kind of strange. While it is romantic, I don't know, it might give somebody the wrong idea because that is a good way

to mess up your life--I always thought." These sentiments illustrate not just the involvement these teens felt, but also their ability to disagree with the movie's solution.

An awareness of the formal elements of the material heightened resistance to messages. A 15-year old boy who had seen Top Gun ten times remarked: "...movies try to be realistic but kind of fake through teenagers eyes so they will not exactly follow but they will have an idea...For Keeps, that was okay. That was reality. That really happens. That girl did not mean to get pregnant and all. And Top Gun that scene about the bar scene, that was a little extreme. I mean coming out singing to her and then making that bet and all...." When asked to explain an early scene in Top Gun an 11-year old said "I think he [Maverick] is just attracted by her probably, I don't know. I guess that is the way the movie wanted it. The movie director wanted it."

In a similar vein a 15-year old girl evaluates Madonna's video this way:

> I didn't really like it because of how degrading it was to women, sort of. It was like--kinda like a toned down, blacked out porno film. I mean from what I have heard about porno films. I have never tried to watch those...it's sort of the attitude that they take in porno magazines and stuff like that. That women are sexual objects and we want to see what kind of neat fantasies that we can have about them. And you know the chain to the bed, the crawling on the ground, like a cat drinks a glass of milk--ah ah--a saucer of milk. That is all very strange and erotic and exotic and doesn't have anything to do with the song. And it is sorta degrading.

That sentiment was common among the females. One 14-year old commented "They [videos] use women like guinea pigs, like you know, like all them videos have a half naked girl in it. I don't see a video these days with good sense to it."

References to the believability or realism of the characters was common in the sample, but articulating the unreality in terms how they experienced enjoyment from it reflects a great deal of visual sophistication in the sample. Of Top Gun one person said "It is mindless. It is a wonderful rock video. It is wonderful action. It is wonderful adventure. It even made me cry when Goose died. I thought because Goose is actually a very believable, very loveable character. But Maverick is very cold, very unbelievable character and Kelly McGillis is the wish-you-were-like-her. But I don't really believe she, that Kelly McGillis, would ever really exist...I think the story is lame but it is a neat movie anyway." This characterization was typical of the majority of this sample. They could empathize with various of the movie characters, but they were able to maintain a critical distance and evaluate the presentations as entertainment, as unreal. One hispanic 14-year old (who had a steady boyfriend) described For Keeps this way:

> Yeah, it was cute, I mean it wasn't you know, I don't know, it is like a stereotype thing. I mean, you know, they are like 18 years old, I mean they must have been real lucky. Not every girl is lucky. In East Austin, I mean any girl over here wouldn't be like a journalist and it wouldn't be easy for them to get into college and stuff, you know, and especially being hispanic and all. For them it was like a perfect ending and not really, over here it is not a perfect ending and probably not anywhere else.

Viewers' resistance to or negotiation of the manifest content or message was emblematic of their ability to evaluate not just the realism of a program but also the efficacy of its messages. One girl, in referring to some of the movies she'd seen that had an impact on her commented: "[I might have learned] like what to do and what not to do. Like I saw

Less than Zero and that really taught me never to do drugs. I saw that guy and he was totally messed up. But sometimes I think they teach more than they influence, cause you can't really learn from school. School has all that peer pressure stuff. It's actually really boring. I mean they teach you "Just Say No" but you can't just say no. It is hard, it's a lot more complicated than that." The same hispanic 14 year old girl quoted above said of For Keeps "It's weird, they try to change the movie and let kids see what is going on, and with the positive ending it is like maybe you can make something out of yourself. But sometimes it is not true. Sometimes people can't do it." This teen was aware of the movie's manipulation, and questioned its correctness.

Discussion

This examination of the social setting in which both videos and movies are watched by teens, and the exploration of how this age group interprets conventional media fare questions some conventional notions about how this age group interacts with media. These interviews illustrate that teenagers actively filter, screen, add to and subtract from video images, making them their own in unique and sometimes highly idiosyncratic ways. Just as there is no universal message, so too there is no universal effect in any one content. These viewers actively engaged the material at hand and assembled a range of associations that explained them. Their explanations indicated varying levels of emotional involvement and empathy, and often a sophisticated evaluation of the formal or production elements as well as an ability to generate allusions and cognitions based on their own life experiences and interactions with other cultural content. These results suggest that teenagers are anything but passive or unsophisticated viewers.

Even this younger group of teens already had well-established notions of propriety in both appearance and behavior. While their ideas about appearance were not particularly subtle or tolerant, their ideas about behavior reflected the ability to use context to evaluate motivations and reasons. Their ability to empathize with movie characters, for example, allowed them to "experience" a certain perspective on situations or problems, but it did not appear to convince them or influence them that that particular way was correct, best, or even reality-based. The performance aspect of music video substantially eroded opportunities for these viewers to feel attached to or emotionally involved with the portrayed situation or the artist; music videos' could be evaluated or judged very critically, their main impact apparently confined to providing a fashion tableau.

Parents have an active role in selecting the sorts of movies teens in this age category experience, but their role in choosing television or music video content for their children is minimal. While watching movies is a fairly social experience most often done with friends or siblings (especially for girls), watching videos appears to be unexceptional and just another category of "watching television" in the home with siblings or alone. The social setting renders movie content grist for conversational fodder among peers.

The implications of these findings for the production community are not quite as clear. On the one hand, these results say that young teenagers are able to critically evaluate video media. Lest this remove the creative community from feeling any sense of responsibility, however, in terms of the messages their product convey, we must point out that an important interpretive source was the variety or the range of other cultural messages used to reference an immediate media product. Teenagers use all sorts of media. They compare them and use them to judge and interpret other messages. It seems essential that the total message arena represent the variety or the diversity of images and ideas necessary so that teens are able to make such judgments. While producers are not responsible for the entire "intertextual" realm, it seems important to maintain an awareness that the images,

references, and information need to maintain their richness and differentiated nature so that the pool of scenarios can nourish human interpretation.

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